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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, the Indian child has been cherished and reared with an approach to parenting characterized by an easy pace, the absence of set rules, and permission to play freely within the matrix of a large, joint family. Rough toys, fashioned by local craftsmen, have been handed down from generation to generation. But today, India is beset with the problems of increased population, poverty, and illiteracy. Resulting socio-economic conditions are catapulting children into a premature adulthood by forcing them to work instead of play. Relatively more educated parents prod their children to be winners of the cut-throat competition for schools and employment, thereby encroaching on their children's play time. Nonetheless, in the time remaining at their disposal, Indian children can be seen to be actively engaged in play and at their creative best in their manipulation of available resources in the play environment. Governmental child welfare intervention programs such as the Integrated Child Developmental Services scheme, the Bal Bhawan Kendras, and the Toy Bank, by providing stimulation and opportunities for overall development, seek to restore to Indian children their right to play. (RH)

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PLAY AND THE YOUNG CHILD - AN INDIAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The child in India has from olden times been cherished and reared with a no-set-rule-easy-pace-approach, where play was freely allowed within the matrix of the large joint family. Rough toys, fashioned by local craftsmen, have been handed down from generation-to-generation. But today, India is besett with a multitude of problems-of numbers, poverty and illiteracy. The resultant socio-economic conditions are catapulting children into an early adulthood, by forcing them to supplement the meagre family resources, curtailing their play time. At the other end of the continuum, the more educated parents are prodding their children to emerge at the top in a cut-throat competition, encroaching on the play time of their children. Nonetheless, in the time at their disposal, children can be seen actively engaged in play and at their creative best in their manipulation of the environmental resources. Intervention programmes of the Government in child welfare are seeking to restore to the child his right to play by providing stimulation and opportunities for overall development.

PLAY AND THE YOUNG CHILD - AN INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Adarsh Sharma* and Renu Khosla**

Very often, after having spoken to a group of parents, I am left with mixed feelings, that are difficult to resolve. There is a new fad sweeping the country - the so called 'Anxiety - Betterment - Competition' mania from the west that is threatebing and curtailing the childhood of our children and beginning to programme them for success at birth, sometimes even in the womb!

It is a fad that needs to be reckoned with.

The Indian parent, being propelled towards the twenty first century, is rapidly discarding the traditional child rearing philosophy of the early days; - the no-set-rule-easy-pace-approach of the Hindu culture.

Traditional Play

Always regarded as a "gift from the God", the child in India has been cherished with love and easy abandon. There were never any norms to which he was expected to conform nor any restrictive or punitive discipline measures. The patterns were set early. The baby was allowed to suckle when it needed, eliminate wherever and whenever, and sleep according to his own physiological cycles. No serious effort was made to teach him anything-the skills emerging as the child matured. And there was plenty of time for play. Suckling at the breast lent itself to early exploratory play, when the mother held the child in close physical and visual contact. The young parents were more often preoccupied in household and money earning chores. But the grandparents, the older uncles or aunts were always at hand.

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From the security of the joint family and within the matrix of the large group of closely spaced siblings and cousins, the child felt free to explore his surroundings. Freedom to manipulate and opportunities for play were boundless. Babies were not left to grow passively and active adult-child interaction was visible. Grandparents were seen holding infants in their laps or rocking them on their feet and playing simple peek-a-boo or finger games with them.

Learning, in the olden days, was conceived of as the responsibility of the family. Ancient scriptures, "the Samhitas", not only laid down the concept of child upbringing but also detailed the types of toys that needed to be fabricated to help the child grow. The wooden rattle, the three wheeled cart were early examples of items that helped the child to develop his grip and take control of his gait. Rough toys, shaped by the local craftsman or even the grandfather were abundunt and available. As early as 1700 B.C. terracota toys, play materials and artifacts of the Indus valley civilizations are available. Stories from traditional and religious texts were narrated to the child by the multiple caretakers, initiating in him the Hindu values and mores. Documentations of the play activities of Lord Krishna by biographers also substantiate the easy-going child-rearing and play modes of the Hindu culture. And so till the age of six, the child lived in a world of his own ordering with few demands made upon him to achieve any specific developmental goal. (Anandalakshmy, 1986).

Not so any more. The so called "young-upwardly-mobile-parents" in a well intentioned though misguided manner, are encroaching on the child's play time. They are attempting to

simplify the process of learning by providing instant solutions for the child to learn. Worse still, are prodding him to learn faster than others so as to arrive at the top in a cut-throat competition. Little time is therefore, allowed for play. The educational institutions, following the trend, have increased the academic burden on the children and home work is found to occupy a large chunk of the free time available to the young child. More and more schools are borrowing the structured environment of the west. Preschools are hardly places where children are allowed to play and learn - but mere downward extensions of the more formalised primary system. Added to this are the ever increasing passive forms of entertainment like the television and the video, that preclude active play on the part of the child.

Demographic Perspective

As we move down the socio-economic ladder, the scenario undergoes a dramatic change. Children are engaged in economic activities and play continues to be allotted the least time and allowed only in the absence of other "meaningful" chores. A look at the demographic data of the country will perhaps be able to show the deep rooted problems, impediments to play, besetting the country.

The 1981 census estimated India's total population at 685 million. Thirtynine percent of this massive total comprises children between the ages of 0-14 years; of which sixteen percent (44 million approximately), are children below six years of age. The vast majority of our child population (78 percent), resides in rural areas and the balance in the few, overcroweded metropolitan centres.

The infant mortality rate is high (104 in 1984), and linked to a cluster of factors; inadequate facilities for health checkup in the antenatal stages, delivery by untrained "dais" (local midwives) in unhygienic surroundings, malnutrition and high morbidity, illiteracy and its consequent lack of awareness. The problem is further compounded by the fact that a large section of our population exists below the level of subsistence. In conditions of such marked social, biophysical and environmental deprivation, the growth and development deficits in young children are likely to be magnified. To supplement their meagre resources people are being increasingly drawn to the cities to try their hand at fortune making. The brunt of this is borne by the child.

Urbanization

The relaxed expanse of the courtyard where these children could play under the watchful eye of the elders has been replaced by cramped lodgings occupied by the smaller, nuclear family. Overcrowding in cities, economic hardships due to low wages and the impersonal atmosphere is leaving an indelible mark on our children. Cooped up in small rooms, they have hardly any freedom of movement. Space for outside play is being gradually taken over for laying out living quarters for this massive influx from the villages or setting up industries and factories. Dangerous roads border residential colonies, making outdoor play extremely unsafe. Parks in the cities are rare. Wherever available, are converted into ornamental gardens with "stay-off-the-grass" signs. Few of those that are still around are run down with the see-saw or the slide or a swing as the only form of play stimulation. With money enough only to meet the physical needs

of the family there is never any spare cash to buy the child a toy. The situation is further aggrevated when the child is apprenticed early in life to some trade and called upon to join the adult work world to supplement the family income. About 20 million children in our country have to eke out a living for themselves by working on odd jobs (Shankar, 1982). Small children can be seen working on construction sites or selling newspapers at road crossings. For these children the age of play is cut short or done away with altogether, catapulting them into an early adulthood. Furthermore, the percentage of our child popultion (3-6 years) exposed to preschool stimulation programme in 1984 was only a meagre 12.5 percent. In the 1,00,000 nonformal centres for the children all over the country only 3 million children were enrolled (UNICEF, 1984).

Despite urbanization, the absence of recreation or stimulation facilities and play materials and the limitations of time as also adult intervention, children can be seen taking time off to roll broken wheel frames on dusty roads', drag flat boards with rollers made out of tin cans or just collect empty cigarette cartons, silver paper foils and sweet wrappers to model little dolls. Kite flying is a favourite passtime for boys and playing "gittas", a game that requires a good amount of physical dexterity to manipulate the four tiny pebbles, of little girls. Their creative abilities can be seen at their best in their clay modelling and sand play. Children with cardboard cartons, in lieu of masks, over their heads can be found deep in their imagined play.

Traditional occupations also serve as healthy playgrounds for the growing child where, under the eagle eye of the parent,

the children can potter with clay or interlace threads while the father moulds clay pots or weaves carpets. Parent stimulation is almost negligent, yet the warmth of their presence is apparent. Such play is dual in nature; developing physical, motor and creative skills while simultaneously introducing the child to his adult vocation. A Children's Media Laboratory set up in the National Council for Educational Research and Training in the country has made extensive documentations of the traditional games, puppets, dolls, science toys and other wooden play materials still available in different regions. Despite this rich heritage, it is ironical that we have to justify the powerful impact of play on the development of the child to the majority who regard it as flimsy, silly, distracting and divorced from the educational process.

The Indian Constitution

Respecting the need for play and its role in the learning of the child, the Government of India has laid down the constitutional rights of its children, to be protected from exploitation and not to be denied their right to play. Social Welfare has been given an integral place in the nation's development. All the States are enjoined to ensure that the health of their children is not abused and that enconomic necessity does not force them to enter vocations unsuited to their age and strength. The constitution also ensures protection against moral and material exploitation of children (Article 39, Constitution of India).

In 1974, the Government of India further reiterated its concern with the growing child by adopting a National Policy for Children which describes them as one of the supremely important

assets of the nation who need to be ensured adequate services for their full physical, mental and social development. To this end the government proposed to adopt certain measures; one of which was to promote recreational activities in schools, community centres and other institutions.

National Policy on Education

In . 1986, the Government of India has also laid down a National Policy on Education which accords high priority to Early Childhood Care and Education programmes. The main feature of these programmes will be to focus on play as a mode of promoting the holistic development of the child. Nonformal education centres for older out-of-school working children are also mooted as part of the plan to facilitate learning and development of the large human capital of the country.

Integrated Child Development Services

India is beset with a lot of problems - poverty being one of the major ones. However, it has recognized the need for development of its human resources in its Constitution and policy guidelines. It has also laid out a massive infrastructure for social development, capable of reaching out to support the great majority of its families in improving the health, nutrition and educational status of their children.

The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme from small beginnings just over a decade ago, involves over 2,00,000 people in promoting basic health care and preschool education. By 1990, the scheme is expected to reach out to 40 percent of the nation's poor and by the turn of the century, it is scheduled to serve all the people below the poverty line. Currently it is the major programme for childhood intervention.

The ICDS operates through an "anganawadi" - literally the courtyard - managed by a local woman called, the Anganwadi Worker (Grassroot functionary). Although the Anganwadi is a centre for distributing supplementary nutrition, immunization of children and education of mothers, its main emphasis is to promote all round physical and mental development through opportunities for play and early stimulation in the nature of non formal preschool activities. Due to the perennial shortage of funds the whole approach has been geared to the use of low cost materials and environmental resources in conducting the activities at the Anganwadis. Games, songs, stories etc. which hardly require any expensive aids are encouraged. Toy making competitions are used for encouraging workers and exploiting their creative urges. What is more significant is the environment that such a centre creates for the socialization of the child, and the opportunities it affords for mixing with play mates of the same age. And the programme, once it reaches all the poor families, will cost less than one percent of the national gross domestic product (UNICEF, 1987).

ICDS is one project that can claim to have significantly and permanently affected the life of people it caters to. Independent studies have concluded that ICDS is making a dramatic impact. Children attending the anganwadis have displayed significantly improved language and cognitive abilities vis-a-vis children who have remained outside its purview (Anandalakshmy and Sharma, 1986; Khosla, 1986; Mistry, 1986). School enrolment levels are higher and dropout rates lower; besides these children are found to be better adjusted to the primary school system and likelihood of their continuing education has increased (Mistry,

1986; Devdas & Jaya, 1986; Sood, 1986).

Because of its scale it has had and continues to have its share of problems; mainly to do with the uneven quality of training, supervision and referral. To strengthen this programme a refresher course in the area of preschool education was organised by the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development, an apex Institute identified for training of ICDS functionaries, to equip the workers with necessary skills to conduct preschool activities in the play-way mode. About 20,000 Anganwadi Workers and 25,000 Helpers received training during 1984-86. An evaluation of the impact of this refresher training to suggest futher training strategies is underway.

Bal Bhawan Kendras

Apart from this massive programme, there are also the Bal Bhawan Kendras (childrens' houses) or recreational centres for children in different parts of the country. Bal Bhawans provide opportunities for creative activities for children over five years and upto 14 years, outside of the more formal school environment. They now propose to amalgamate the formal with the nonformal by introducing creativity into the classrooms.

Voluntary organisations like the Mobile Creches for children of migrant labourers and the Centre for Child Education in the tribal areas of Kosbad (Gram Bal Shiksha Kendra) in Maharashtra, have concentrated their efforts to identify and develop, the child's innate propensity for imagination and creativity in manipulation of the materials available in their environment, so as to defy the notion that lowered socio economic levels limit creative expression.

Toy Bank

Also constituted recently is a "Toy Bank" by the Government. Mass media is being used to appeal to the better off to share their play-materials with the not so financially endowed. A collection centre in each state will loan toys and hold out a promise to the vast majority of our deprived children of possessing one toy to manipulate and play with.

Today's parents are more aware of toys and their role in cognitive development. A toy that would provide a variety of experiences and opportunities for imaginative play is more likely to be picked up than one that has limited possibilities (Anandalakshmy, 1982). Such awareness is revolutionizing the still very infantile toy industry of the country, to develop and market toys that can stimulate, are durable and attractive, and not out-of-reach of parents.

India has a wealth of traditional play materials and games that lend themselves to creative imagination and science experience. Through these it is possible to achieve easily and inexpensively, an appreciation of one's natural environment and develop freedom of expression. To quote David Haxton, Regional Director for South Central Asia, UNICEF from the 1983 Afro-Asian Conference on the Role of Play in Child Development; "It is these possibilities that require to be explored and not just a blind imitation of the Western patterns of upbringing and replication of their toys. It is not essential that one set of materials or activities would suit all children irrespective of their individual propensity, social situation and cultural tradition".

The trends and patterns along which the present day adults, not only in India but in the west too, are traversing is alarming. Their indifference to play, over-emphasis on theoretical and academic aspects as well as unhealthy competitition, increasing exploitation of children leading to a deterioration of moral values and traditions and inadequate enviromental planning are all issues that need to be examined and dealt with to ensure the child's right to play in the future.

Conclusion

A multipronged approach is perhaps the solution to combat such indifference. A more comprehensive documentation that would also draw from the traditional play materials and games and suggestions for future pro topes is required. Such play materials should be capable of being mass produced. Programmes for training must imbue early childhood education workers in the use of the play-way mode. Research, undertaken by national bodies, should disseminate new methodologies and trends in early childhood education work. At the international level, communication links must be strengthened to prevent duplication of efforts. More and more use will have to made of the latest technological advancements and media to inculcate an awareness among the multitude of adults and early childhood workers.

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